

AMERICAN CIVIL RELIGION AS A RHETORICAL DEVICE
IN RONALD REAGAN'S RESPONSE TO TRAGEDY

by

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According to Roderick Hart, (1984b), the rhetorical functions of the Presidency are crucial to its overall role as a public institution. Even the most powerful events are denied essential meaning until the President, through what he says and does, provides the public with a context for interpreting what has occurred. In moments of national crisis or tragedy, this "rhetorical function" of the Presidency holds particular importance for helping the American public transcend the cynicism and self-doubt often raised by such difficulties. Presidential rhetoric after the bombing of Pearl Harbor, Kennedy's assassination and the resignation of Nixon proved critical in enabling Americans to draw some semblance of order and direction out of the chaos associated with those events. The public has come to expect the President to "make sense" out of situations which appear threatening and indeterminant.

President Ronald Reagan is no stranger to the rhetorical demands of crisis or tragedy. Time and again during his first six years in office, Reagan has come before the American people to offer solace

and encouragement in the aftermath of some devastating event. In this, he differs little from his predecessors, all of whom have faced similar rhetorical challenges. What sets Reagan apart, however, may be the success with which he has met these challenges. According to Time's Richard Morrow, "He (Reagan) enjoys a mysterious communion with the American people. He is a ceremonial presence." (Morrow, 1986). Morrow, perhaps without intending it, has alluded to an essential strength of Reagan as a Presidential rhetor: his mastery of the epideictic form, and, in particular, that species of epideictic which might be labelled "response to tragedy."

This study argues that the success of Reagan's rhetoric in response to tragedy is due to its reliance on themes corresponding with those appearing in American Civil Religion as outlined by Robert Bellah. Specifically, Reagan's Civil Religious themes allow him to: 1) specify the terms in which a particular tragedy will be viewed and understood by the American public; 2) enhance his own credibility as President, while diverting criticism that, as President, he should be held accountable for catastrophes involving government personnel and equipment; and 3) provide the American public with

familiar and tested formulas for overcoming the doubt and grief which national tragedies often leave in their wake.

In order to develop its thesis, the study will proceed in the following fashion, after a brief overview of the nature and importance of this study: Chapter Two will introduce the construct of American Civil Religion as it has been articulated by sociologist Robert Bellah. This section of the study will illuminate the rhetorical features of Civil Religion. Chapter Three will identify three recent national tragedies, each of which has drawn a rhetorical response from President Reagan. In addition, those responses will be examined in an effort to show how they incorporate Civil Religious themes and values. Chapter Four will outline the ways in which Reagan's use of Civil Religion has, in the objectives described, enabled him to accomplish specific rhetorical objectives with respect to the public's understanding of each tragedy, his own ethos as President, and the public's ability to cope with each event. Chapter Five will present a summary and conclusions of the study, particularly as these center on the issue of Reagan's rhetorical effectiveness as President.

This study is intended as a contribution to the critical study of Presidential rhetoric. As Otto Windt, noted scholar of contemporary political rhetoric, comments in his article defining this field of study, Presidential rhetoric is concerned with a President's public persuasion as it affects his ability to exercise the powers of his office. (Windt, 1984). Windt argues that the study of Presidential rhetoric may help define the range of rhetorical strategies Presidents employ in certain kinds of situations. In particular, Windt argues that studies of Presidential rhetoric may help identify how Presidents use language to define or "name" situations, and thereby determine their meaning to the public.

Windt also contends that studies of Presidential rhetoric may help critics to understand how Presidential rhetoric influences the public's perceptions of a given President, and in particular, perceptions about his competence, character, and reliability. Finally, Windt urges that rhetorical studies of the Presidency may illuminate the ways in which Presidential discourse helps the American public to accommodate itself to specific actions and policies which the audience might otherwise find objectionable. In this sense, Presidential rhetoric often provides the public with formulas for

transcending its own concerns in order to embrace a new course of action or to continue in a difficult one.

The present study is limited in focus to a specific type of discourse within a specific Presidency. The author recognizes the inherent dangers of attempting to generalize from such a narrow base. However, it is hoped that the study will contribute to the broad objectives outlined by Windt for studies of Presidential rhetoric. More to the point, the study will contribute to an understanding of the Reagan Presidency and, particularly, the rhetorical effectiveness of Reagan in moments of national dismay.

Chapter II--American Civil Religion and Presidential Rhetoric

When faced with a situation that calls upon his ceremonial role, Reagan invokes the values found in America's Civil Religion. He is certainly not the first President to do this. Theologist and sociologist Robert Bellah (1967) explains that Civil Religion has long been a common denominator of American social values.

Even though the constitution calls for a separation of church and state, the political realm has still incorporated a religious dimension. Bellah calls Civil Religion "indispensable" to our American society. A republic as an active political community of participating citizens must have a purpose and a set of values (Bellah, 1980). The creators of our government were a religious people and their public life gave expression to that fact, but they avoided any hint of the state establishment of a religion by opting for a neutral religious language that could give offense to none. A nonspecific and nondenominational religion, with commonly accepted tenets posed little threat to those who feared the development of a mandated government religion. Bellah further explains that Civil Religion has escaped earlier analytical attention because of the

controversial nature of the subject. Because of the accepted standards of separation of church and state, most have been reluctant to accept and endorse that America does, indeed, have a national religion.

Civil religion is the collection of religious beliefs accepted by a majority of a population. In America, Civil Religion is based on certain common elements of religious orientation that the great majority of Americans share. America's civil religion, according to Bellah, is a system of beliefs, symbols, and rituals clustered around six major canons:

- 1) God has sovereignty. The President is under God and at times must defer wisdom and power to God. Because God is in power, man-made governments are subservient to him. From this follows the philosophy that the God-ordained rights of men and women are more basic and should take precedence over any political structure. This is illustrated in the phrase, "One nation under God" as found in the Pledge of Allegiance. The Bill of Rights in the constitution clearly reflects this inherent belief. When a President refers to God's will or exults human rights above a system of government, his statements adhere to this first theme.
- 2) We have a duty to do God's work. Americans have an obligation, both collective and individual, to carry out God's will on Earth. John F. Kennedy

summed this up in his inaugural address when he stated, "God's work must truly be our own." As a country and individually, Americans must do whatever is necessary to insure that the rights of individuals are not being violated by some type of political structure. We also must not turn away from the challenges that God has presented in order to reap his true blessings and avoid his wrath. Presidents often call their citizens to action by commenting on the obligation each citizen has to work for the goals of God.

3) America is the new "Promised Land". God has led his people to establish a new country that will provide guidance and aid to others. This tenet is founded in a belief that the country is a chosen one and its very conception the result of divine guidance. It is the role of Americans as the New Jerusalem to defend their country and values with treasure and when necessary, with blood. Along these same lines, Americans have a duty to rectify all erring governments, i.e. those without democratic values. The struggle to improve these governments and benefit their citizens is consecrated by invoking the great theme of sacrifice. Always in the background and occasionally in the foreground of civil religion, is the notion that the world itself is in need of reform, both religious and civil and it

is Americans duty to insure this reform takes place. When a President comments on the guidance that America gives other countries and the way other countries look to America for help, he is acknowledging this canon of Civil Religion.

4) Death, sacrifice, and rebirth are necessary to the preservation of our country. At times, there may be no other option than the sacrifice of lives in upholding American values. Since the Civil War, a new theme of death, sacrifice, and rebirth has entered into American Civil Religion. During the Civil War, the nation faced imminent destruction. But it was not destroyed. Instead, the United States was saved and went on to prosper. As Bellah explains, "the nation enjoyed the equivalent of religious rebirth." (Bellah, 1984) In American Civil Religion, freedom and equality are joined with the Christian sacrificial act of death and rebirth. President Lincoln recognized this in the Gettysburg Address. In his speech honoring the dead, he uses such birth images as "conceived," "brought forth," "created," and "a new birth of freedom." In the final paragraph of the Gettysburg Address, Lincoln states,

It is for us the living, rather, to be dedicated here to the unfinished work which they who fought here have thus far so nobly advanced. It is rather for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before

us--that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion--that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain--that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom--and that government of the people, by the people, and for the people shall not perish from the earth.

The Civil War provided an important turning point for American Civil Religion. Lincoln's rhetoric included a new theme for Civil Religion--the propriety of sacrificing lives for national goals. An acceptance of the values of Civil Religion implies an acceptance of the inevitable necessity of death and sacrifice to achieve the blessed state of rebirth. When soldiers are actually dying, it becomes possible to consecrate the struggle further by invoking the great theme of sacrifice (Bellah, 1967). It is not uncommon for Presidents to uphold a struggle by exulting those who have given their lives for "the cause."

5) Each individual is personally motivated to help achieve national goals. Civil religion serves to mobilize deep levels of personal commitment to national goals. Because Americans believe as they do, they also see the necessity to act to accomplish these goals which God, in his sovereignty has ordained. It is the public's duty to do what is necessary to reach these ends. Each person in

his/her own sense of rightness, can and will work to achieve these goals.

In a critical study of Presidential rhetoric, this canon takes on added importance. This personal commitment to these values that citizens possess, provides a President with an important tool for instilling personal motivation in his audience. If Americans indeed possess this commitment, the President can then assume that they have a willingness to sacrifice for these goals. This canon further allows a President, in a sense, to reach each member of his audience individually.

6) God is the central religious symbol. In deference to the individual religions, Jesus, or specific practices do not appear. Civil Religion features a God who stands above the nation and whose ends are the standards by which the nation is judged; a higher reality who embodies the standards the republic attempts to uphold. Bellah explains that it is not a specific religion with individual traditions, but a broad universal religion that recognizes only a supreme being.

Presidents incorporate the values of Civil Religion into their rhetoric, due to the nature of political communication. Combs (1980) writes of "public distance," the social relationship wherein histrionic methods must be used because communication

is occurring in a public forum. Most political communication is this way. The action zone is separate from the lives of most people. A President cannot speak individually to the eighty million or so who may be listening. There must be some form of shared meaning for him to adequately communicate with his audience.

The concept of shared meaning is very important to rhetorical critics. Burke's term for this shared meaning is "identification." (Burke, 1950). When the audience accepts or rejects the same ideas, people, and institutions that the speaker does, identification occurs. (Brock, 1982). Civil religion provides a format for identification. A speaker can invoke any of its planks and be reasonably certain that a majority of his or her audience will identify with those beliefs. Once this identification occurs, the speaker is able to persuade and motivate the audience and thus achieve essential rhetorical goals.

America's Civil Religion has rhetorical significance stems from the fact that it is so broadly ingrained in the American public's world view. Taken together, its six canons provide a flexible system for motivating vast numbers of the President's listeners. When a President possesses a tool to instill a personal commitment in each member of his audience, he has a very important rhetorical

resource. Because of the widespread acceptance of Civil Religion and its considerable potential for personal motivation, Civil Religion becomes not only a political theory, but a rhetorical theory as well.

Civil Religion's use as a rhetorical resource is not new. References to the values in Civil Religion are almost invariably found in the pronouncements of American Presidents on solemn occasions dating back to Washington. Indeed, the rhetorical potential of Civil Religion as a means to unite and motivate an audience dates back to Puritan times. John Winthrop aboard ship in 1630 outside Massachusetts Bay, called America a "Promised Land", telling his followers that they had crossed the Red Sea and the Jordan.

America's first Presidents, Washington, Adams, Jefferson, and Madison set the tone of the national beliefs and laid the foundation for future President's to accept and extoll American Civil Religion. In Washington's first inaugural address of April 30, 1789, America's first President freely invoked the values of Civil Religion.

It would be peculiarly improper to omit in this first official act my fervent supplications to that Almighty Being who rules over the universe, who presides in the councils of nations, and whose providential aids can supply every defect...The propitious smiles of Heaven can never be expected on a nation that disregards the eternal rules of order and right which Heaven itself has ordained.

Adams followed Washington's lead in his inaugural in referring to "Providence," "the being who is supreme over all," "Patron of Order," "Fountain of Justice," and "Protector in all ages of the world of virtuous liberty." Jefferson, too, recognized the importance of civil religion as he stated in his second inaugural, "I shall need, too, the favor of that Being in whose hands we are, who led our fathers, as Isreal of old, from their native land and planted them in a country flowing with all the necessaries and comforts of life." Madison commented on, "that Almighty Being whose power regulates the destiny of nations."

Abraham Lincoln, used these common images profusely. Indeed, he portrayed the whole epic struggle of the civil war, as one of sin, judgment, and redemption in the white soul (Bellah, 1967). In his second inaugural Lincoln stated,

If we shall suppose that American slavery is one of those offenses which, in the providence of God, must needs come, but which, having continued through His appointed time, He now wills to remove, and that He gives to both North and South this terrible war as the woe due to those by whom the offense came, shall we discern therein any departure from those divine attributes which the believers in a living God always ascribe to Him? Fondly do we hope, fervently do we pray, that this mighty scourge of war may speedily pass away. Yet, if God wills that it continue until all the wealth piled by the bondsman's two hundred and fifty years of unrequited toil shall be sunk, and until every drop of blood drawn with the lash shall be paid by another drawn with the

sword, as was said three thousand years ago, so still it must be said, 'the judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether.'

Robert Bellah (1967) stated that Lincoln "wrote the American Civil Religion New Testament." Indeed, his second Inaugural Address borrows freely from beliefs, such as judgment and rebirth, found in the Biblical New Testament. It is because of Lincoln's pronouncements that the theme of sacrifice appears in American Civil Religion. Once it does appear, other President's can then invoke this theme as they support later struggles.

Modern Presidents have followed in their predecessors' footsteps and also drawn upon the values of Civil Religion. John F. Kennedy used common beliefs from Civil Religion in his Inaugural Address. He stated, "the same revolutionary beliefs for which our forebears fought are still at issue around the globe--the belief that the rights of man come not from the generosity of the state but from the hand of God." This directly exemplifies Bellah's first tenet that "God has sovereignty." At the conclusion of his Address Kennedy goes on to add, "Finally whether you are citizens of the America or of the world, ask of us the same high standards of strength and sacrifice that we shall ask of you. With a good conscience our only sure reward, with history the final judge of our deeds, let us go forth to lead the

land we love, asking His blessing and His help, but knowing that here on earth God's work must truly be our own." President Johnson also recognized America as the promised land in his inaugural address.

They came here--the exile and the stranger, brave but frightened--to find a place where a man could be his own man. They made a covenant with this land. Conceived in justice, written in liberty, bound in union, it was meant one day to inspire the hopes of all mankind; and it binds us still. If we keep its terms, we shall flourish.

Presidents have a long tradition of invoking the values of America's Civil Religion. Although most of the preceding examples are from inaugurations, Civil Religion also takes on importance in other types of ceremonial addresses. Among these are Presidential responses to tragedy. Three recent episodes from the Reagan Presidency illustrate both the prominence and the function of Civil Religion in this arena of Presidential discourse.

Chapter III--Reagan and Three Tragedies

On three occasions during his Presidency, Ronald Reagan has been called upon to address momentous national tragedies. The first of these was the terroristic attacks on marines at Lebanon in 1983. The second a plane crash involving members of the 101st Airborne in 1985; and the third, the explosion of the space shuttle Challenger in January, 1986.

The first occurred on an early Sunday morning in October, 1983, when more than two hundred marines were sleeping in their barracks in the concrete Aviation safety building on the edge of the Beirut International Airport. The Marines were in Beirut on a peacekeeping mission trying to stabilize the government of Lebanon which was under assault from Druse and Shi'ite Muslims, reportedly aided by the Syrian government. Suddenly a truck, laden with dynamite crashed into the building's lobby on a suicide attack. The truck was estimated to have contained about 2,000 lbs of high explosives. The blast at the Marine barracks was so severe that it scattered fragments for hundreds of feet in every direction and left a crater thirty feet deep and forty feet wide. By evening the toll stood at one hundred forty-seven dead, sixty wounded. For the

U.S. Armed Forces, it was the worst disaster since the end of the Vietnam War a decade ago.

Newsweek magazine correspondent William Smith wrote, "The terrorist attack illustrated in the most grisly fashion just how risky it is for the U.S. to venture not just with its diplomats but with its troops, into a region that has been plagued for centuries by factionalism and hatred." But by mid-afternoon, the President had ordered Marines at Camp Lejeune, N.C. to replace the men who had been killed that morning. This was not a popular decision. Senator Ernest Hollings of South Carolina demanded that the Administration draft a plan to withdraw the Marines within 60 days. "If they've been put there to fight, then there are far too few," he said, "If they've been put there to be killed, there are far too many." There were many unanswered questions concerning the Marines and their mission. One week after the attack Smith wrote, "The Administration has never really given a thoroughly convincing, coherent answer to the question of why the Marines are in Lebanon." Stationing Marines in Beirut had been a controversial move for Ronald Reagan and now in addition to comforting a shocked nation, he had to respond to a situation in which it appeared that he had made an erroneous decision.

The second tragedy to which Reagan responded happened on December 12, 1985. The chartered 1969 DC-8 was bringing home American soldiers for Christmas after six months of peacekeeping duty in the Sinai desert. The refueling stop at the airport in Gander, Newfoundland took about an hour. The plane taxied down the runway and then took off for Fort Campbell, Kentucky. It flew for less than half a mile before crashing in flames. The DC-8 landed into a wooded area, strewing bodies and debris for three-quarters of a mile. There were no survivors among the 256 on board. All were members of the elite 101st Airborne division known as the "Screaming Eagles." The Gander air tragedy was the worst in U.S. military history.

At Fort Campbell, Kentucky, the division's home base, the post gymnasium had been decked with banners and a brass band was ready to welcome the peacekeepers home. Instead, family and friends listened to news reports that confirmed what many had already heard on their way to the celebration. None of 101st would be coming home.

In determining the cause of the disaster, there were immediate suspicions of sabotage. All reports later proved unfounded. "We have nothing to indicate that there was hostile action of any kind," said Pentagon spokesman Robert Sims. However, many

questions remained. Many of them centered around Arrow Air, the carrier company that owned the DC-8. The same plane had aborted two earlier takeoffs in July and November because of engine and tail problems. Speculation also revolved around the unusually heavy load of equipment and passengers that the plane carried, and the pilot's failure to request a de-icing. The latter had been standard procedure among other flights leaving Newfoundland that day.

Just six weeks after the Newfoundland air crash, Reagan faced another national tragedy, the explosion of the space shuttle Challenger. Space travel had apparently become so routine that America's 56th manned excursion into space, in January, 1986, included the first civilian, teacher, Christa McAuliffe. On her return she was to teach publicly televised lessons on space. She never had the opportunity to do so. Barely a minute into the space shuttle Challenger's tenth and final flight, the craft exploded before a national television audience. Dead were astronauts Francis Scobee, Michael Smith, Ellison Onizuka, Ronald McNair, Gregory Jarvis, Judith Reznick, and teacher Christa McAuliffe. Regular network programming was delayed the entire day while radio and television newscasters recounted the tragedy.

Soon after the tragedy, Newsweek correspondent Jerry Adler wrote, "If the disaster was a humiliating failure of rocket technology, it was at best an equivocal success of technology for the dissemination and amplification of grief." Public figures well-informed about space travel did not share in Adler's belief that the explosion was a "humiliating failure." "We always knew there would be a day like this," former astronaut, now senator, John Glenn said in the week following the explosion. "The possibility of sudden death is something that all explorers learn to live with. Watching the film of the shuttle, it shows you how fast and how final things can become," said legendary test pilot Chuck Yeager. "One of the most commonplace observations after the explosion was that space travel had come to seem routine, so safe that anyone in reasonably good physical shape could join in without cause for serious concern," wrote Adler. Clearly it had not. The dramatic end of Challenger was a serious blow to the space program and to the nation's complacency over the risks of manned space exploration.

Each of these tragedies rocked the nation and called for the President to make some suitable public response. His remarks in each case, were directed to a national audience. After the bombing in Lebanon, Reagan spoke to the nation in his weekly radio

broadcast on the death of military personnel in Lebanon in Beirut. Later, he spoke at Andrews Air Force Base, Maryland, at a Memorial Ceremony honoring the victims of the bombing of the Embassy. This ceremony followed the return to the United States of the bodies of the Americans who were killed in the bombings. On November 4, Ronald Reagan spoke to military personnel in Cherry Point, North Carolina. The purpose of his remarks was to honor those Marines who had been killed in what is now known as the Beirut Massacre.

On December 16, 1985 Reagan spoke at a memorial service for the victims of the 101st Airborne. The ceremony took place at Fort Campbell Army Air Field in Kentucky. Besides those watching on national television, the immediate audience included family members and friends of the victims who were to have returned home to that same air base.

On January 28, 1986, the President was scheduled to make his annual State of the Union Address. But the shuttle's explosion earlier in the day forced a postponement of the State of the Union Address and made necessary instead, a Presidential response to the explosion of the space shuttle Challenger. All major networks televised this address. Reagan's second public response to the explosion occurred on January 31, 1986. At the Johnson Space Center in

Houston, Texas, Reagan spoke to the families and friends of the seven astronauts who had died in the disaster. Reagan's six public responses to these three tragedies offer much evidence that he does incorporate the values of American Civil Religion into his ceremonial addresses.

In weighing the value of these tragedies and Reagan's related discourse for this study, we must first look at the incidents' historical importance. Each is in some way significant. Never before have so many servicemen and women been in danger from attacks from an enemy they cannot adequately identify or prepare for. Never before has the military been faced with such an air disaster. And never before has America lost any of her astronauts in the air. Secondly, each of these tragedies has a different causal agent. Humans perpetrated the Marine attacks. The actual reason for the airline crash is unknown, while mechanical failure in a solid rocket booster resulted in the shuttle's explosion. The difference in causality becomes important because it means the study is looking at three different types of tragedies. Hence, a better opportunity exists to make generalized statements about how Ronald Reagan responds to exists.

An important basis for choosing these three tragedies involves their national significance. The

series of attacks on Marines brought about a furor in Americans. Even if they weren't sure how to spell his name, they knew Khadafi was the enemy. Who didn't share in the sorrow of the families of the 256 killed as they approached their homeland for Christmas? And how many Americans held day and evening-long vigils that riveted them to television sets as again and again they watched the fiery explosion in the sky? These tragedies touched many lives. The President's words assumed public importance because they responded to these events.

As Reagan responded to each of these situations, he faced serious rhetorical challenges to his Presidency. The challenges centered around the situation or how Reagan would direct the public to view each tragedy, Reagan's ethos, and the beliefs and feelings of the audiences. Each of these tragedies moved the American public to grief. As President, Reagan had to define the situations and provide meaning for the audience. He was the one who needed to explain exactly what happened in Lebanon and what direction American space exploration should take following the explosion. In defining each situation, Reagan had to address the causal agent. He had to answer "Why?" Why did someone on a suicide mission break through our security, killing himself and 200 others? Why did 256 innocent men and women

who were all set to return to their homeland for Christmas perish in a routine flight? And why did seven people, including a schoolteacher specially chosen for this flight, die less than two minutes after takeoff?

Presidential credibility became another concern after each tragedy. Reagan had faced much criticism for his decisions to station Marines in Lebanon. With the carnage, many Americans now had ammunition to attack Reagan and his policies. He needed to prove to his audience that he was not to blame and that, in contrast, stationing Marines in Beirut had been the proper decision. After the Newfoundland air tragedy, Reagan had to face insinuations that his Administration was at fault in choosing Arrow Air as the chartered airline. In the Challenger explosion, the rhetorical challenges included a challenge to the space program. Billions of tax dollars had been spent on the space shuttle program. Should it continue? Was the tragedy a way of proving that space is to remain untamed?

Reagan's audiences provided the final challenge. He addressed a grieving public. Several of the speeches were directed to the entire nation, while the rest were to the families and friends of the victims, those who felt the pain even more sharply. Reagan needed to provide words of comfort and

encouragement. He needed to let Americans know that everything "was still okay."

In responding to the three tragedies, Reagan faced and attempted to master each of these challenges. He did so, however, by casting each tragedy in civil religious terms so that its implicit challenge to the authority of the President, to his own credibility, and to the values of the audience could be overcome.

Taken as a whole, the rhetoric of Reagan's response to the tragedies coincides firmly with the tenets of Civil Religion as described by Bellah. The same values present in Reagan's responses appear in American Civil Religion as each of Bellah's six tenets is well represented in Reagan's discourse.

In Reagan's rhetoric surrounding the Beirut Killings, he often calls upon the values of civil religion. Bellah states that the first belief of our civil religion is that God is more powerful than any nation and therefore, what He has ordained as the rights of man are more basic than any political structure. When speaking to military personnel about the deaths in Lebanon and Grenada, Reagan comments, "Freedom is being tested throughout the world. We stand with South Korea, and I will be going there next week to carry our message to them, a message of

revulsion for this atrocity, determination to stand with our friends in support of freedom" (Reagan, 1983).

Seven months earlier in a radio address to the nation on the death of military personnel in Lebanon, Reagan said, "More than ever, we're committed to giving the people of Lebanon the chance they deserve to lead normal lives, free from violence and free from the presence of all unwanted foreign forces on their soil" (Reagan, 1983a). It makes no difference that a system of government is in place. If it does not preserve the individual rights of its men and women, then according to the first tenet of Civil Religion that government is inherently immoral.

Reagan's speeches dealing with the Lebanese tragedies also reflect Civil Religion's second characteristic. In telling Americans that they must carry on, he relies on the commonly held view that America and Americans have a special obligation to carry out God's will on Earth. In the case of the Marines, America's special obligation is to secure peace and individual rights for all men and women. Reagan states, "The best way for us to show our love and respect for our fellow countrymen who died in Beirut this week is to carry on with their task, to press harder than ever with our peacemaking efforts, and that's exactly what we're doing." Later in that

same speech he says, "I know I speak for all Americans when I reaffirm our unshakeable commitment to our country's most precious heritage--serving the cause of peace and freedom in the world" (Reagan, 1983a). At a ceremony honoring the victims, he remarks, "Let us dedicate ourselves to the cause of those loved ones, the cause they served so nobly and for which they sacrificed their lives, the cause of peace on Earth and justice for all mankind" (Reagan, 1983b). Reagan also illustrates America's duty when he states, "We commit our resources and risk the lives of those in our Armed Forces to rescue others from bloodshed and turmoil and to prevent humankind from drowning in a sea of tyranny....The rest of us must remain always faithful to those ideals which so many have given their lives to protect" (Reagan, 1983c).

Reagan's comments remind the public that American goals exact a cost, which must be paid, sometimes in blood. "If this country is to remain a force for good in the world, we'll face times like these, times of sadness and loss" (Reagan, 1983c). Reagan both warns terrorists and bolsters his listeners when he asserts, "We do know that the terrorists who planned and carried out this cynical and cowardly attack have failed in their purpose. They mistakenly believe that if they're cruel enough

and violent enough, they will weaken American resolve and deter us from our effort to help build a lasting and secure peace in the Middle East. Well, if they think that, they don't know too much about America." (Reagan, 1983a). "Americans have courage and determination, and we will not be intimidated by anyone anywhere" (Reagan, 1983c)

According to Bellah, American Civil Religion holds that God has charged the people of this nation to help establish new social orders throughout the world. Americans are to provide guidance and wisdom to other countries. This Civil Religion value is especially clear in Reagan's foreign policy rhetoric after attacks on our servicemen and women abroad. Reagan states, "We can be proud that our country has been playing such a unique and indispensable role in the Middle East, a role no other single nation could play. When the countries of the region want help in bringing peace, we're the ones they've turned to. That's because they trust us, because they know America is both strong and just, both decent and dedicated" (Reagan, 1983a). At a ceremony honoring the victims of the bombing, he has this to say, "Afflicted mankind looks to us for help--with faith in our strength, our sense of justice, and our decency." (Reagan, 1983b). Later, in another memorial speech on November 4, he comments, "The

world looks to America for leadership" (Reagan, 1983c).

America's role in establishing social order and taming frontiers does not come without a price. The fourth tenet of America's civil religion recognizes that sometimes Americans must pay the ultimate price--their lives. In order for freedom and equality to exist in the world there will and must be sacrifice and death. But in sacrifice, American ideals are confirmed anew. Lincoln's second inaugural address set forth the terms on which later Presidents would come to view disasters as a form of redemptive sacrifice. Lincoln declared that death for a noble cause actually provided that cause with a new life. According to Reagan, it is by their deaths that American servicemen and women show the depth and honesty of their commitment and by extension, the nation's commitment to freedom.

I have a tremendous sense of pride in those who sacrificed their lives in our country's efforts to bring peace to the Middle East and spare others the agony of war. Greater love hath no man. The courage and the dedication of these men and women reflect the best tradition of our Foreign Service and our Armed Forces. (Reagan, 1983a).

That such men and women exist is testimony to the motivational power of American Civil Religion, a fact recognized by both Bellah, and, implicitly, by Reagan as well. According to Bellah, the drive to

attain our nation's goals can mobilize deep levels of personal motivation. Those meeting this challenge know the dangers they face and are still willing to forge ahead. Bellah commented on the powerful motivation that Civil Religion instilled.

Individuals are willing to sacrifice their lives for the attainment of national goals as ordained by God. Speaking of the Americans killed in Lebanon, Reagan echoes this sentiment.

We will not forget their courage and compassion, and we will not forget their willingness to sacrifice even their lives for the service of their country and the cause of peace" (Reagan, 1983a). These gallant Americans understood the danger they faced, and yet they went willingly to Beirut....They knew the road they traveled was hard and fraught with peril (Reagan, 1983b). As ever, leathernecks are willing to accept their mission and do their duty. This honest patriotism and dedication to duty overwhelms the rest of us" (Reagan, 1983c).

We grieve along with the families of these brave, proud Americans who have given their lives for their country and for the preservation of peace....I come here today to honor so many who did their duty and gave that last, full measure of their devotion. They kept faith with us and our way of life. We wouldn't be free long, but for the dedication of such individuals. They were heroes. (Reagan, 1986).

Civil religion, says Bellah, is very broad-based. It has not adopted exclusively the traditions of any one religious denomination. God is the central figure but rituals and practices identified with specific churches are not mentioned. Reagan's eulogies are suitably ambiguous in this

regard. He ends every speech with the phrase "God Bless You." He makes several other references to the "arms of God" and "the face of God."

Thus, Reagan reflects the canons of American Civil Religion in his public response to the killing of Americans in Lebanon. By doing so, he provides a basis for confronting the rhetorical problem which the Beirut tragedy poses for the Presidency, his personal credibility, and the American public's self-perception. In much the same way, his response to the airplane crash which killed 256 members of the 101st Airborne, also invokes the values found in Civil Religion.

Reagan publicly recognizes the authority of God, not only in political matters but in more personal ways as well. In a memorial service commemorating those who lost their lives in the 101st Airborne crash, he prays: "Receive, O Lord, into your heavenly kingdom the men and women of the 101st Airborne, the men and women of the great and fabled Screaming Eagles." (Reagan, 1985) The men and women of the 101st Airborne also showed their dedication to the nationally sanctified cause of peacemaking. "Their commitment was as strong as their purpose was pure. And they were proud. They had a rendezvous with destiny and a potential they never failed to meet" (Reagan, 1985). Again, President Reagan

comments upon the personal motivation that Civil Religion values have inspired in the dead. Like the Marines in Lebanon, the 101st Airborne crew knew their danger. "Who else but an idealist would choose to become a member of the Armed Forces and put himself or herself in harm's way for the rest of us?...The men and women we mourn today were peacemakers. They were there to protect life and preserve a peace, to act as a force for stability and hope and trust" (Reagan, 1985). Hence, their sacrifice contained the seeds of renewal. "They were the ones of whom Christ spoke when he said, 'Blessed are the peacemakers: for they shall be called the children of God'" (Reagan, 1985).

The explosion of the space shuttle Challenger presented a unique rhetorical challenge because the national "goal" involved was somewhat different. The end sought was not peace for all individuals, but the conquest of space. Even though the purpose is not the same, the personal motivation and level of commitment of the victims is. Civil Religion's values still apply. "Today the frontier is space and the boundaries of human knowledge....(NASA) must forge ahead with a space program that is effective, safe, and efficient, but bold and committed" (Reagan, 1986b). After the Challenger explosion Reagan likens the frontier of space to the frontier

of the Old West and reminds listeners of the
gravemarkers of those who died along the Oregon
trail. In doing so, Reagan reaffirms America's
commitment to space exploration by commenting that in
addition to a national goal, space exploration is
also the desire of the victims' families. "We must
pick ourselves up again and press on despite the
pain....Every family member I talked to asked
specifically that we continue the space program, that
that is what their departed loved one would want
above all else. We will not disappoint them"
(Reagan, 1986b) In the same manner, he explains that
this is not an isolated case. He calls specifically
upon Bellah's canon that rewards do not come without
a price. "Painful things like these happen. It's all
part of the process of exploration and discovery.
It's all part of taking a chance and expanding man's
horizons. The future doesn't belong to the
fainthearted; it belongs to the brave... .We'll
continue our quest in space. There will be more
shuttle flights and more shuttle crews" (Reagan,
1986a).

One message Reagan wanted to communicate was
that along with the additional space crews, may come
additional tragedies, but like those who died opening
a new frontier, their deaths will not be in vain.
"They had a hunger to explore the universe and

discover its truths. They wished to serve, and they did. They served all of us" (Reagan, 1986a).

"Words seem insufficient even to measure the brave sacrifice of those you loved and we so admired....The sacrifice of your loved ones has stirred the soul of our nation and through the pain our hearts have been opened to a profound truth: The future is not free: the story of all human progress is one of a struggle against all odds" (Reagan, 1986b).

The Challenger astronauts demonstrated a strong commitment to the national goal of space exploration, a commitment that persisted even in the face of danger. The shuttle astronauts were aware of the possibility of a catastrophe. "Perhaps we've forgotten the courage it took for the crew of the shuttle; but they, the Challenger seven, were aware of the dangers, but overcame them and did their jobs brilliantly" (Reagan, 1986a). "Their truest testimony will not be in the words we speak, but in the way they led their lives--with dedication, honor, and an unquenchable desire to explore this mysterious and beautiful universe....(America) was built on heroism and noble sacrifice. It was built by men and women like our seven star voyagers, who answered a call beyond duty, who gave more than was expected or required, and who gave it little thought to earthly reward" (Reagan, 1986b). With these comments, Reagan

is helping to reaffirm America's commitment to space exploration and bolstering personal motivation in accordance with the values of American Civil Religion as he illustrates the heroism of the astronauts.

As in his earlier responses, Reagan acknowledges the presence of a Supreme Being. The men and women of the Challenger, Reagan tells us, have "slipped the surly bonds of earth to touch the face of God" (Reagan, 1986). Here again is the generalized deity of American Civil Religion.

Reagan's use of Civil Religion has important consequences. In responding to the Beirut disaster, the 101st Airborne crash, and the Challenger explosion, Reagan faced valid rhetorical challenges and chose the values of civil religion as his rhetorical strategy. In his responses to each tragedy, Reagan leaned heavily on American Civil Religion as a "context" for discussion of the event and its meaning. The influence of this "context" upon Reagan's ability to define the situation posed by each tragedy, to sustain his own ethos, and to address the needs of his audiences remains to be assessed.

Chapter IV--Transcending Tragedy: Civil Religion and the Rhetorical Situation

Kenneth Burke argues that verbal symbols are meaningful acts in response to situations. The symbols chosen by a speaker reveal his or her motives, because the act of selecting one symbol over another "locks" the speaker's attitude into the language. (Brock, 1982). Hence, Reagan's reliance on the values of Civil Religion as expressed in his speeches, provides some clue to his own understanding of the tragedies in question. At the same time, it suggests the speaker's belief that his "attitude" toward each of the situations can and should be shared by his audience.

Some critics, for example Gronbeck, would take exception to the idea that Reagan unknowingly uses civil religion to accomplish his goals. He states that people are fully aware of their role as actors. They often, and perhaps, always, play out pre-given scripts in their interaction with others (Gronbeck, 1980). However, Civil Religion's values are so entrenched in Presidential rhetoric, that a ceremonial speech would seem incomplete without it. Whether or not Reagan has made a conscious decision to employ civil religion to meet his goals is less

important than the fact that civil religion provides a context within which Reagan can portray tragic events as meaningful, both to himself and to others.

The use of Civil Religious values provides Reagan with a means of identification. These values allow him to identify with the broad audience that he faces in each situation. By invoking Civil Religion, Reagan portrays each of these tragedies to his listeners in terms familiar to all Americans. He catapults the "public distance" Combs describes and speaks directly to the audience. Once this identification occurs, the values of Civil Religion further aided Reagan as he faced the rhetorical challenges concerning the event, his ethos, and the audience that each tragedy presented.

Reagan's incorporation of the values of Civil Religion in his discourse grants him the ability to do these things:

- 1) It allows him to influence the rhetorical "situation". Reagan can provide his own definition of the problem posed by the tragedy. In these three situations, Reagan defined the problem as essentially "moral" rather than "material" and suggested appropriate courses of action for members of the audience. True to the Civil Religious values, these actions were willingness, persistence, and continued

sacrifice.

- 2) Reagan's use of American Civil Religious values builds his credibility. Civil Religion implies a certain relationship between the President and the people. The President is elevated to a position close to God. The people then view him as priest-like. Hence, the use of Civil Religion enhances the credibility of Reagan's policies and at the same time provides Reagan and his administration with a way to avoid blame because of the assumption that the failure was "meant to be". Morrow commented that, "Reagan has an eerie gift for distancing himself from failures" (Morrow, 1986). By invoking Civil Religion, Reagan can use broad, sweeping statements to define the tragedies and uphold his own authority and credibility.
- 3) The use of Civil Religion provides a means to help the nation cope. Each of these three tragedies left in its wake a grieving nation. In responding to these tragedies, Reagan encountered the challenge of the attitudes and beliefs of the audience. Through his remarks, he had to provide meaning to the situation and help the audience overcome their feelings of loss and helplessness. Hart states Reagan is a great communicator. He has the ability to tell the American tale to

Americans in ways they find comforting (Hart, 1984b). His speeches offer solace to a grieving nation. A large portion of his success in consolation comes from Reagan's use of the values of Civil Religion. He provides the audience with a heroic picture of the victims and the mourners are comforted from the belief that these people lost their lives gloriously for a cause they believed in.

The first benefit to Reagan from invoking Civil Religion evolves from the audience's perception of the situation. Because each person accepts these Civil Religious values, Reagan can shape the situation accordingly. Americans form a different mental image of those "sacrificing their lives for their country" than of those being sent on a foolish mission of "Kill or be killed." By controlling the audience's view of the situation, Reagan can face the rhetorical challenges to his credibility that these tragedies present.

Reagan can then turn to other matters that civil religion allows him to address. One question that occurs after a tragedy is, "Who is to blame?". Civil religion helps Reagan to say in effect, "Not me. Not my administration." The first means he uses in absolving himself is to explain that the victims went into the situation knowingly, aware of

the dangers they faced. The Marines knew that Beirut was a threatening city. The Airborne were idealists, they were on a risky peacekeeping mission. The shuttle astronauts knew that they were still pioneers, that "every liftoff is a miracle." Even if it contradicts other information; such as Christa McAuliffe remarking on a morning news program last summer, that she wasn't afraid, because there were so many safeguards, nothing could happen, listeners still hear that these victims went willingly.

Reagan indirectly takes some of the burden off himself by citing his own grief about the situation. "There can be no sadder duty for one holds the office I hold than to pay tribute to Americans who have given their lives in the service of their country" (Reagan, 1983b). "Nancy and I are pained to the core by the tragedy of the shuttle Challenger" (Reagan, 1986a). He also does the same for NASA by citing their grief. "We know of your anguish," he tells them.

Reagan's use of Civil Religion also urges Americans to realize that in order to accomplish their goals, a price must be paid. No one is to blame for this, especially not the President. As Reagan states, "Freedom isn't cheap. Tragedies are not new." The long tradition of bloodshed creating, preserving, and defending this nation helps the

public to realize that individual rights have a cost. Bellah (1975) explains the three major times of trial for the nation: 1) the struggle for independence and liberty; 2) preservation of the union during the civil war; and 3) helping to provide order and justice at home and in the world. Obviously, it is the last trial that Americans face today. Based on their heritage, citizens understand that nobody is individually responsible for the deaths incurred in these instances.

Finally, civil religion lends credence that Reagan's policies were the right choices. Stationing Marines in Lebanon was a controversial move. After the bombing many called for troop withdrawal. Reagan answered this by once again illustrating America's role as a "light among the nations." As a chosen people, Americans must stay and defend the rights of others; they are on a divine mission. The 101st Airborne was in Cairo to "protect life and preserve a peace, to act as a force for stability and hope and trust." Protection of life is a hallowed goal. In the same manner the billions of dollars spent on the space program are also defended. "It's all part of the process of exploration and discovery. It's all part of taking a chance and expanding man's horizons....That's the way freedom is, and we wouldn't change it for a minute." When Reagan

proposes these goals and purposes as ordained by God, which civil religion allows him to do, it becomes much more difficult for opponents to stand on firm ground with a population who believes the same values the President invokes.

Hart (1984b) states that in Presidential government, a chief executive's job is to personify issues, to link himself with policy in such a way that human flesh is added to the bare bones of political decision by the dedication and commitment to a personal cause. That is precisely what Reagan does in utilizing civil religion in defense of his policies. It is not just the actual decision of sending Marines to Beirut, but the men and women and their collective dedication and commitment that we also regard when considering Reagan's decisions.

Reagan possesses many strengths that aid in his role as President. One of the greatest is his personal authenticity (Morrow, 1986). His audience considers his message in light of his sincerity about what he is saying. Americans can believe with him that the astronauts are with God. We can believe that he feels every one of the 256 killed on the plane are true heroes. It is his use of civil religion that makes his credibility so stable. Combs, (1980) would say that Reagan has "role

conviction;" he believes in the rightness of his role and the sincerity of his words and actions.

The final benefit of civil religion is its ability to help a nation deal with a tragedy. It (Civil religion) seems to transfigure reality so that it provides moral and spiritual meaning to individuals or societies (Bellah, 1975). Religion is often the imagery by which people make sense of their lives. The Protestant tradition tells us to turn to our faith in times of trial, as does Reagan. "The nation, too, will long feel the loss of her seven sons and daughters. We can find consolation only in faith" (Reagan, 1986b).

In doing this, Reagan promotes a unified people, reaching out and helping each other cope. "You do not grieve alone. We grieve as a nation, together," he tells the family and friends of the 101st Airborne. Reagan reaches outside the rigid framework of ideologies to the pool of American experience (Morrow, 1986). Bellah (1975) states that religion is the expression of a meaning integrated society, thus Reagan's optimistic belief in a united America comes through loud and clear within these speeches.

This role of Reagan's, the messenger and comforter, must be the primary one in these situations. What can be said to the family and friends of the 256 who just lost their lives this

close to Christmas? This audience wants to understand and the President is the one who must try and help them. He must first play the role of public pedagogue and then as public persuader (Auer, 1980).

Presidents serve as sources of inspiration and wisdom, translating life's options for their fellow citizens, and at the same time keeping their spirits from plunging (Hart, 1984b). It would be easy for Americans to become disillusioned after any of these disasters. "Pull out the Marines;" "Discontinue the space program;" "Keep our servicepeople home where they belong." Even though these phrases did resound through the U.S., the sentiment they expressed was the exception and not the rule among the public. In fact, a Gallup poll taken for Newsweek magazine shortly after the explosion, showed that despite concerns about safety in the shuttle program, Americans clearly believe that the United States must maintain a program of manned space missions.

Through his words of inspiration and wisdom, Reagan displays the uncanny knack of making Americans feel good about what is happening. As Morrow (1986) wrote in a cover story for Time magazine, "Carter said that things would get worse and worse and never get better, Reagan says and proves they will get better." Part of this "proof" comes from the way Reagan portrays those he honors. He gives the public

heroes. He illustrates their sense of pride and duty as they go about their work. He explains the commitment it takes to face those dangers, and when they do fall, he recognizes them as heroes. Time and again, through Reagan's speeches the public recognizes his theme that nothing is nobler than sacrificing for your country. This is not a new theme, as Washington, Lincoln, and Eisenhower might attest. Throughout history, Presidents have invoked this theme, central to the assumptions of American Civil Religion when faced with a difficult rhetorical situation.

Chapter V--Summary and Conclusion

The values of American Civil Religion actually predate the founding of the country. Throughout history, American Presidents have invoked these values in their ceremonial addresses. This study examined the Presidential use of Civil Religion by looking specifically at Ronald Reagan's rhetorical responses to three national tragedies; the bombing of the Marine barracks in Beirut, Lebanon, the airplane crash of the 101st Airborne over Gander, Newfoundland, and the explosion of the space shuttle, Challenger.

This study accomplished two things. First, it sought to demonstrate that Reagan does invoke civil religion in his epideictic speeches dealing with major tragedies. The amount of evidence gathered from Reagan's public responses to the above tragedies clearly illustrates his tendency to portray national setbacks in Civil Religious terms. Once it had been determined that Reagan did employ all of the values of Civil Religion, it was possible to draw conclusions about what function these served. Why did he choose to include these values?

Second, the study attempted to show how Civil Religion allowed Reagan to accomplish rhetorical goals in three areas declared by Windt to be

important to Presidential rhetoric: the definition of the situation, the maintenance of Presidential ethos, and the fulfillment of audience needs. Reagan's use of Civil Religion provided him with a tool to meet each challenge. Once he had identified with the audience through the values of Civil Religion, he could use his own terminology and outlook to provide a lens through which the audience could view the situation. He thus could provide meaning for the audience, a function that Roderick Hart calls "essential" to the Presidency. Civil Religion also added to Reagan's credibility and allowed him to circumvent blame for the failures in each tragedy. In Reagan's use of Civil Religious values, they actually appeared to endorse his decisions in each instance. They also gave him a tool to show the personal motivation of each of the victims, and in doing so allowing him to alleviate his guilt. The values of Civil Religion incorporated in Reagan's rhetoric also helped the grieving public to cope with each situation. By recognizing the victims as heroes, Reagan provides a means for the audience to feel pride in the dead, and renewed commitment in the cause.

The benefits of this study to rhetorical criticism lie in three areas. Initially, it addresses the broad nature of Presidential rhetoric.

The benefits that come from invoking Civil Religion are not unique to Reagan. Rhetorical critics can now examine other Presidents and other forms of ceremonial address to garner additional information on the benefits of American Civil Religion as a rhetorical resource. Secondly and more specifically, this study has delved into the rhetoric of a successful communicator. Not all Presidents have shared in Ronald Reagan's success at communication. This study allows critics to examine why Reagan is so successful. The values of Civil Religion provide Reagan with a means to overcome three critical rhetorical challenges. If Reagan had not met these challenges, his Presidency would have suffered. But, in successfully meeting these challenges, he further adds to his laurels as the "Great Communicator."

As a final addition to rhetorical criticism, this study examined a specific type of epideictic speaking--the response to tragedies. Because of the conclusions drawn here, critics can now compare other speaker's discourse in response to tragedies and look for similar occurrences of the values of Civil Religion and determine the benefits to the speaker. Or, if these values do not appear, critics can evaluate the success or failure of the response and the causal elements of its outcome.

Reagan has been called, "The Great Communicator," a title due in part to his successful use of the values of American Civil Religion. This led Richard Morrow (1986) to write, "The 'Great Communicator' has come to communicate with the American people on a tribal level, a fascinating feat considering the many tribes." Undoubtedly, this success is due to his ability to illustrate the common ground he shares with the audience in the belief in America's Civil Religion.

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AMERICAN CIVIL RELIGION AS A RHETORICAL DEVICE
IN RONALD REAGAN'S RESPONSE TO TRAGEDY

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Abstract

American Civil Religion, as outlined by Robert Bellah, is a system of beliefs, symbols, and rituals that the majority of Americans share. These are clustered around six major canons: God has sovereignty; Americans have a duty to do God's work, America is the new "Promised Land"; death, sacrifice, and rebirth, are necessary to the preservation of our country and its heritage; each individual is responsible for the attainment of national goals, and God is the central religious symbol. These tenets provide American Presidents with an important rhetorical resource. A President, when invoking the values of Civil Religion, can have a profound effect on the situation, his own ethos, and the audience, three areas that Otto Windt emphasizes in his guidelines for critical studies in Presidential rhetoric.

Ronald Reagan has enjoyed much success as a communicator. This may be due, in part, to his espousal of the values of Civil Religion in ceremonial situations. This study examined Reagan's use of Civil Religion in his responses to three tragedies: the bombing of the Marine barracks in Lebanon, the airplane crash of the 101st Airborne over Newfoundland, and the explosion of the space shuttle Challenger. Six different Presidential addresses provided the discourse for this investigation. Each tragedy possessed inherent rhetorical challenges centered around the situation, speaker, and audience.

Invoking the values of Civil Religion allowed Reagan to successfully meet each challenge. He defined each situation, by encouraging the audience to view the tragedy through his chosen rhetorical "lens". Civil Religion also benefited Reagan's etho by enhancing his credibility and allowing him to defer blame for the tragedies. It gave him a way to personalize his addresses and, in doing so, motivate each member of the audience. For the audience, Civil Religion offered a source of comfort, an explanation of the tragedy, and a means of renewing personal commitment to national goals. As a rhetorical strategy, American Civil Religion benefited Reagan in ceremonial situations and therefore contributed to his role as a successful communicator.